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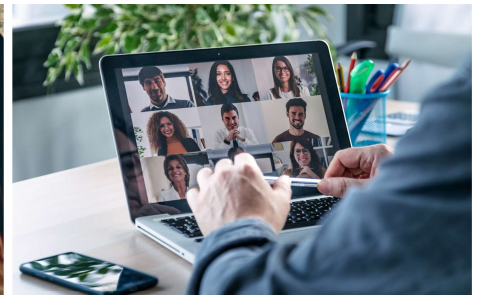
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Navigating Cross-Cultural Understanding for Effective Communication

By John McGraw, Founder of Hiyaku Coaching

As the Greek philosopher Epictetus said nearly 2000 years ago, "We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak." The point is to encourage us into listening actively, yet today it feels as though we are using that listening time simply to find opportunities to refute arguments or even attack the other person.

Before transitioning into cross-cultural competency facilitation and coaching, I was an English language instructor and International English Language Testing System (IELTS) examiner. As an IELTS examiner, it was my job to analyze the candidates' English capabilities and score them on how strong their English abilities were. Communicative ability was important, but there was also a focus on their use of lexis and grammar.



“ *Now more than ever, open communication and understanding are necessary in Canada's workplaces and academic environments* ”

In other words, for the most part, I was listening for the faults in the structure rather than the merit of the content of what they were saying. It feels like much discourse today has become that way: listen for faults and things you don't agree with so you can use them to attack. There is little to no attempt to even try to understand the other side. Now more than ever, open communication and understanding are necessary in Canada's workplaces and academic environments. Not only is it possible to empathize with the position of another without agreeing, but it is also essential in effective collaboration and problem-solving.

The OSEE Framework: Explained

One process to help you pay attention and empathize is the OSEE Framework, developed by interculturalist Darla K. Deardorff, (2000). Based on the scientific method, it gives a practical process for avoiding assumptions. Here is the breakdown:

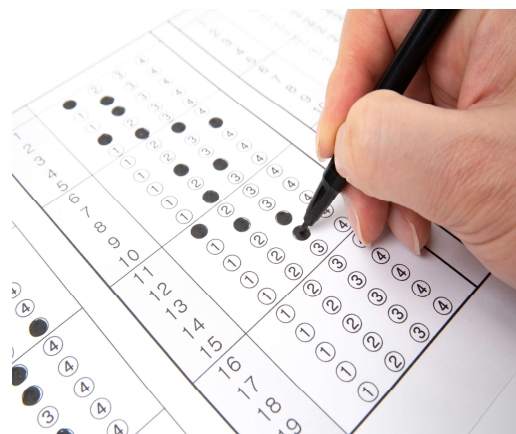
- O**bserve (and listen to) what is happening
- S**tate objectively what is happening
- E**xplore different explanations for what is happening
- E**valuate which explanation(s) is the most likely one(s)

By following and practicing these steps, it's possible to avoid assumptions and consider other possibilities, keeping an open mind rather than falling into the trap of listening for what our unconscious bias wants to hear.

Let me give an example from my own life experiences. This happened when I was living and working as an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) instructor in Japan at a private language school nearly 20 years ago.

One day, I was teaching a lesson on preparing for the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), which was quite popular in Japan at the time. Getting good results on the test could lead to overseas placements and other opportunities in many corporations.

The primary focus of the lesson was about multiple-choice questions. In Japanese culture, there is a tendency towards risk avoidance. The thinking goes that one doesn't want to risk choosing the wrong answer and end up looking foolish, so it's not uncommon to leave multiple-choice questions unanswered.



However, there were no penalties for choosing a wrong answer in the TOEIC test, so the learning point of the lesson was to always choose an answer, even if you had no idea what the correct option was. Over the course of the lesson, we covered explanations and completed several exercises reinforcing this key idea.

One of the students, Kenji, was a businessman. He seemed intent on what I was saying, so I focused my attention on him. He nodded at every explanation with a smile and appeared to do well in the exercises. Finally, it came time to do the practice test. The students would demonstrate the central idea of leaving no question unanswered. I gave the instructions and asked Kenji, "Do you understand what to do?" He nodded and said "yes" so I thought he was prepared. However, once the practice test was finished, it turned out Kenji still left several questions unanswered...

The OSEE Framework: In Practice

I will tell you in a moment how I reacted that day, but let's take a moment to use the OSEE tool to analyze this situation.

Observe:

Let's consider reading the above description as an observation.



State:

Doing this as objectively as possible, I will state the actions like this:

- Kenji said "yes" and smiled when I asked him if he understood my instructions.
- He didn't follow the instructions.



Explore:

We want to consider multiple explanations here rather than choosing our first reaction. I invite you to consider a few of your own first (and they could very well be better than mine.) Once you have done that, please look at the explanations which I have come up with:

- He might have thought he understood the instructions.
- He may have been deliberately ignoring my instructions.
- He could have been too embarrassed to tell me he didn't understand.
- It's possible he believed telling me he didn't understand would cause trouble for me.

Evaluate:

There are different avenues you can take here. In the moment you may only be able to draw on your own knowledge, but ideally, it's good to consider other sources.

- Ask for clarification from the others involved in the situation
- Speak to colleagues who are also part of the culture
- Check other sources on the internet (multiple sources are better than just one)



Unfortunately, at that point in time I was not aware of the OSEE tool and had little experience working across cultures. Having grown up in Canada where I was taught that you are supposed to speak up and ask questions if you don't understand, I couldn't comprehend Kenji's reaction. In that moment, I reacted emotionally and let out my frustrations on Kenji. As a result, he never came back to my lessons.

I still regret my reaction that day, but I did eventually apply the OSEE tool in an unknowing manner. As I continued to teach, I found that whenever I asked, "Do you understand?" my students would almost inevitably answer "yes", even when it was clear they didn't understand.

Realizing that there was something going on that I didn't understand, I spoke to my Japanese colleagues about this, and it came to light that the root cause was collectivism and group harmony. In Japanese culture, the thinking was that if one student starts asking questions because they don't understand something, it is an insult to the teacher's ability. Furthermore, it also wastes the time of the other students who understand what to do and get on with it. A student who speaks up in this situation would be considered selfish, placing their own needs ahead of the group's. Better to pretend you understand and hopefully figure it out along the way.

Let us be clear that I am not pushing a stereotype here. There are of course Japanese who are quite individualistic, just as there are Canadians who are more concerned about group harmony. However, we cannot ignore cultural tendencies that have been reinforced by history, geography, and social development.

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In fact, we must be aware that our own opinions on what is "correct" behaviour in different situations are influenced by our cultural upbringing. This is a key factor in cross-cultural competency and developing empathy, which affects how well we can connect with others on an equal footing. Then we can adjust our approach.

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The OSEE Framework: In Practice

Going back to the OSEE framework, I had now evaluated different explanations and came out with the one that was the most likely. I now had two points to consider:

1. To be an effective teacher, I had to confirm my students' understanding of given tasks.
2. Asking them "Do you understand?" was a waste of time.

There were multiple avenues I could take and did. One was to let my students know that it was all right for them to ask questions because it was a normal part of Canadian culture. While there is some merit to this in terms of exposing them to another culture, there was no way I could expect them to change so quickly. It would also be questionable to try forcing them to conform to my way of doing things, especially as I was a guest in their country.

Ultimately, I decided it was my responsibility to adapt my approach to them. To that end, I changed the questions I asked. After giving instructions in beginner-level classes, I would ask the students as a group a series of yes-no questions. For example, "Are you going to answer every question?" followed by "Are you going to choose an answer even if you don't know the correct answer?"

For higher-level classes, I would ask the group to explain the task to me. If the answers didn't match my expectations, I knew to adjust my approach with further examples or explanations.

In this way, I was the authority figure asking for answers from the group, rather than putting pressure on them to ask questions individually. This helped preserve group harmony and allowed me to do my job.

In our daily lives, we can apply the OSEE tool to listen more attentively, avoid drawing rushed conclusions, and find ways to have meaningful dialogues.



John Edward McGraw, a Canadian with extensive experience in Japan, facilitates cross-cultural success through Hiyaku Coaching. As a Certified Intercultural Coach and Facilitator, he assists newcomers, expats, governments, and businesses in navigating cultural divides in Canada. Through coaching, advising, and hosting the Intercultural Insiders show, he promotes understanding and integration across diverse communities.

Showcasing Community Voices

“What role does cultural competence and sensitivity play in building a healthy organization, and how can organizations help individuals develop these skills?”

Sheryll S A Young, Senior Manager, Global Mobility | Chair CERC DEI Committee, Vialto Partners

A healthy organization equally prioritizes the well-being of its employees and strategic business goals. A healthy organization values individuals regardless of diversity, fostering an environment where individuals thrive and contribute their best work. Open communication, collaboration, and trust among employees foster innovation and adaptability in a healthy organization. Cultural competency and sensitivity are integral, enabling effective interaction with individuals from diverse backgrounds by understanding, respecting, and valuing their perspectives and beliefs. Sensitivity acknowledges cultural differences, unlearning biases to promote understanding and inclusion.



The personal skills that organizations can help individuals develop, is best underpinned by a collective organizational mindset to drive meaningful change.

Recommendations:

- Conducting cultural assessments to determine organization’s current level and to identify areas of improvement for tailored training or initiatives.
- Integrating cultural competencies into policies, performance and fostering open-mindedness to diverse viewpoints.
- Listening actively to understand the diverse lived experiences is key for personal and organizational success.

Dr. Agnes Thomas is the Executive Director of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Toronto

Cultural competency and sensitivity are critical in creating a safe, respectful, trusting, inclusive, and belonging environment for staff in our increasingly multicultural and diverse workplaces. When an organization prioritizes cultural competency and sensitivity as part of its organizational practices, policies, and values, they become manifested in how the organization conducts business and the way culture is developed and experienced by the employees. This intentionality and practice both attracts and retains talent.

An organization that is genuinely dedicated to these values will ensure that its governance, leadership, and frontline staff embody these principles in their actions and service delivery. Cultural competence is also demonstrated in interview processes, HR policies, and the range of training provided to members across the organization.

In such a setup, individuals are provided with additional occasions to enhance their skills and knowledge through company-sponsored celebrations, dialogue and knowledge exchange forums that foster an environment of collegiality, learning and trust among diverse individuals and groups.



Showcasing Community Voices

Neil Gonsalves, Ontario post-secondary educator, TEDx speaker, author, and columnist. He is the co-founder of SG Productions - Creators and publishers of Seeking Veritas on Substack.

The Canadian demographic landscape is rapidly changing, and change brings both new opportunities and renewed resistance. Healthy organizations leverage the strengths inherent in cultural plurality by promoting respectful discourse and prioritizing viewpoint diversity. Cultural competence and sensitivity is the outcome of promoting diversity without being divisive.

Organizations are responsible for setting the internal cultural tone and they benefit from practicing DEIB as an operating principle rather than an a performative activity. Offering an invitation to collaborate and cooperate based on common purpose and common humanity allows all employees to find a space and a place within the organization free from binary labels.

The simple truth often hidden in plain sight is that there is usually more diversity within groups than between them. Organizations can help individuals develop cultural competence by enabling them to resist the social pressure to conform to simplistic and deterministic narratives based on immutable characteristics.



From the Newsstand

Introducing WINS New Board Members



**Stephen Cryne, President and CEO,
Canadian Employee Relocation Council**

Stephen Cryne is the President and CEO of the Canadian Employee Relocation Council (CERC), a prominent organization that plays a vital role in the relocation industry in Canada. With a focus on research, professional education, and information dissemination, CERC serves as a leading advocate for facilitating the seamless movement of talent, collaborating with governments to influence legislative changes. Stephen Cryne stands as a respected figure in the global mobility community, known for his expertise, leadership, and advocacy efforts. Stephen says, "It's an honor to serve on the board of directors of WINS, and the opportunity to work with an esteemed team of professionals. I look forward to bringing my workplace experience and commitment to eliminate workplace exclusion and discrimination in Canada. Under the leadership of Dr. Hitu Hood, I am confident that WINS will succeed in ensuring the creation of more equitable workplaces in which diverse members of Canadian society can flourish."

**Adwoa K. Buahene, MA.,
Founder of The StoryBank**

Adwoa K. Buahene advocates for workplace equity through storytelling. As principal of AkB Talent Edge Inc., she specializes in equitable talent management strategies. With over two decades of experience, including co-founding n-gen People Performance Inc., Adwoa has collaborated with Fortune 500 companies, governments, and nonprofits. Co-author of "Loyalty Unplugged: How to Get, Keep & Grow All Four Generations," she took a leave from consulting to work in the not-for-profit sector to serve as CEO of Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC) and VP Fundraising and Community Partnerships at Habitat for Humanity GTA, gaining first-hand insight into equity challenges. Adwoa invites you to share your own story anonymously. Join in building better workplaces for all generations. Visit [The Storybank](https://www.thestorybank.com).

To help WINS continue advocating for equity & inclusion, please donate and/partner with the organization at www.winscanada.com/donate.

For more information, email admin@winscanada.com or visit www.winscanada.com